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Palestinian Military Capabilities Today

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Afghanistan: Competing Diplomatic Offensives

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Articles

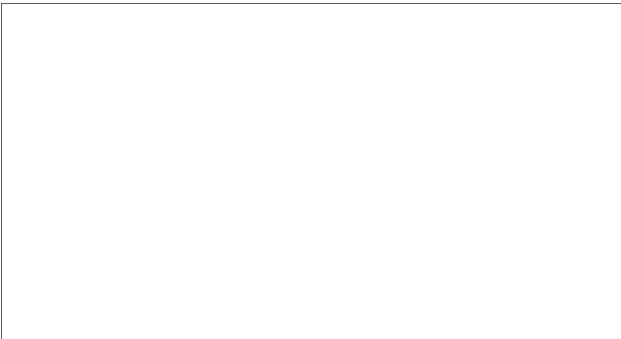
Palestinian Military
Capabilities Today

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Four years after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, PLO factions appear to be making only a limited recovery of military capabilities as small pro- and anti-Arafat groups restock their arsenals and return fighters to southern Lebanon. These small gains must be seen in light of the disasters that beset the PLO in 1982. The Israeli invasion shattered the PLO's conventional military strength and destroyed its state-within-a-state in Lebanon—there were 23,000 Palestinian fighters there in 1982, but only 8,000 today. Given the severity of its defeat by Israel, the PLO is unlikely in the near future to regain the strength or influence it enjoyed at the beginning of this decade.

such as field exercises, are rare. The PLO's proficiency with heavy weapons is poor.

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The PLO today faces many obstacles. Syrian and Lebanese antagonism prevents Yasir Arafat's Fatah from deploying the bulk of its forces in Lebanon. Syria continues to sponsor Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israelis, but only by forces of the Damascus-based Palestine National Salvation Front (PNSF). Arab states that harbor the PLO endorse the ideal of Palestinian statehood but keep their resident Palestinian contingents under tight control. Financial troubles and bitter factional infighting increasingly trouble the organization.

Motives for joining PLO units vary widely. Committed Palestinian nationalists and Marxists form the core of many factions. Their zeal for the destruction of Israel, for a Palestinian state, and for the advancement of "progressive" causes worldwide sets their groups' agendas. But many others "join" because of poverty or coercion. The PLO's wages are low, but they are sometimes the only steady income available to Palestinian refugees. Articles in the Palestinian and Western media state that PLO groups, particularly Fatah, also have welfare and pension plans to provide for fighters' dependents or survivors. These incentives apparently lure some non-Palestinians into PLO service. African and Asian Muslims served in PLO units in Lebanon in 1982. Palestinian young people are sometimes told they must spend up to a year as fighters. Published interviews with refugees suggest that young men in

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Despite these constraints, the conventional forces of Fatah and other Palestinian factions retain some capabilities. They will continue to harass northern Israel and Israeli forces in the West Bank, will remain a focus of Palestinian national aspirations, will complicate the solution to the civil war in Lebanon, and may eventually precipitate, as they did in 1982, a Syrian-Israeli clash.

PLO Training and Morale
PLO training varies widely in breadth and quality. All combatants receive at least rudimentary physical and small-arms instruction, but more advanced training,

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refugee camps who refuse to join the PLO often have the harshest forms of retribution visited upon them or their families. [Redacted]

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Capabilities of Major PLO Factions

Fatah. Fatah controls the largest of the PLO's military forces. Fatah's military arm is the Palestine National Liberation Army (PNLA). After the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, PNLA units were dispersed to Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, Sudan, and the Yemens. Many returned to northern Lebanon in 1983, only to be expelled again by the Syrian-backed mutiny of Abu Musa. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)

The Palestine Liberation Front has at least three relatively independent factions. One headed by Abu Abbas is close to Arafat, but it has no significant military capability. Another led by Talat Yaqqub is supported by Libya. The third group, led by Abd al-Fatah Ghanim, is aligned with Syria and based in Damascus. [Redacted]

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Palestine National Salvation Front (PNSF)

The Palestine National Salvation Front is a Syrian-dominated bloc of anti-Arafat groups. Israeli press reports indicate that constituent groups of the Salvation Front, headquartered in Damascus, have about 6,000 fighters deployed in Syria and Lebanon. [Redacted]

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Abu Musa (Fatah Rebels)

In 1983, Fatah activist Said Musa Muragha (Abu Musa) led a mutiny against Yasir Arafat in Lebanon and with Syrian support ran most of Arafat's men out

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of Tripoli.

Outlook

The PLO retains only a fraction of the armed strength it possessed before the 1982 war, and its rival factions are unlikely to collaborate in using their forces against a common enemy. Fear of Israeli retribution probably will keep most Arab states from allowing resident PLO contingents to pose a serious threat to Israel's borders. Lebanese antagonism toward the PLO, together with Syrian President Assad's hostility to Yasir Arafat, will keep the organization from reasserting the control over southern Lebanon it enjoyed five years ago.

The PLO probably is as weak and divided now as it was when first organized in the mid-1960s. Several factions, such as Saiqa and the Badr Brigade, are essentially vassals of their host nations. The largest group—Arafat's Fatah—is spread among seven countries and plagued by intramural rivalries and financial problems. Arafat is too weak to claim credibly to speak for most non-Fatah groups, but he is still too important symbolically to allow any other leader to shoulder the mantle of "national" leadership.

Despite these weaknesses, PLO groups will continue to be players in Lebanon. No Lebanese faction is strong enough to expel Fatah or its rivals from their bases and fortified refugee camps, and neither Syria nor Israel seems willing to pay the military and political price to drive Fatah from Beirut and Sidon. Yet the Palestinians' strength is likely to remain largely defensive. They do not have—nor are they likely to obtain—the arms and manpower to re-create the state-within-a-state they ruled before Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Palestine Liberation Army (PLA)

The Palestine Liberation Army, although not formally a member of the Salvation Front, is virtually a unit of the Syrian Army. It is probably as strong as it was before the 1982 war,

estimated it had about 4,000 men. The

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Afghanistan: Competing Diplomatic Offensives

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Kabul, under Moscow's tutelage, has embarked on a more aggressive diplomatic campaign to improve its international image. We believe this campaign reflects not only longstanding Soviet and Afghan regime sensitivities to world public opinion but also concerns about stepped-up Afghan resistance diplomacy. Although the insurgent alliance's tour of the United States and Europe this summer fell short of its goals, we believe it succeeded in raising the diplomatic costs of the war for Moscow.

Kabul Promises Diplomatic Campaign

As part of this diplomatic initiative, a delegation led by Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Sarwar Yurish traveled in July to Zimbabwe—the Chairman of the Nonaligned Movement for the next three years—to establish diplomatic relations. Yurish obtained Prime Minister Mugabe's agreement in principle to establish relations—a development Kabul media immediately announced with great fanfare. According to the US Embassy in Islamabad, however, Zimbabwean officials told the Pakistanis that they have no intention of opening an embassy in Kabul, will not allow Afghanistan to open one in Harare soon, and will delay diplomatic relations until a political solution to the Afghan conflict is reached. The Zimbabweans promised no change in their support for the Nonaligned summit's or UN General Assembly language on Afghanistan.

We believe Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev's announcement in July that Moscow is prepared to remove six regiments from Afghanistan by the end of 1986 is partly designed to support Kabul's diplomatic initiative. Gorbachev may also be hoping that Moscow's overtures toward China will raise concern in Islamabad about China's long-term steadfastness on the Afghan issue.

According to the US Mission to the United Nations, in a surprise move South Yemen—Moscow's client—proposed in June that the UN General Assembly's Asian Group endorse Afghanistan's candidacy for one of the vice-presidencies of the 41st UN General Assembly. The US Mission to the United States believes Afghanistan's candidacy has virtually no chance of success.

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The Resistance's Grand Tour

The Soviet and Afghan regime diplomatic offensive probably is partly a reaction to the more active diplomacy of the Afghan resistance alliance this year. In early June, members of the resistance alliance began a tour to gain international recognition, enhance the legitimacy of the alliance, and increase the diplomatic costs of the war for the Soviets. Although the visit failed to win US diplomatic recognition for the alliance, the resistance leaders' well-publicized meeting with President Reagan was immediately condemned by both the Soviet and Afghan regime media, which accused the United States of supporting "hired killers." [REDACTED]

The Soviets may also have been disturbed by the high-level reception that resistance leader Rabbani received in Saudi Arabia, where he met with King Fahd, and in France, where he met with French Prime Minister Chirac and Foreign Minister Raimond. Initially reluctant, the Saudis—with US prodding—feted the delegation at their Embassy in Washington and publicly acknowledged Riyadh's contribution to the resistance war chest. In France, Rabbani received the highest official reception accorded any Afghan resistance leader to date and pledges of increased humanitarian aid. The French gestures probably were particularly galling to Moscow because they came just before French President Mitterrand was to meet Soviet leader Gorbachev.

[REDACTED]

Prospects

The Afghan regime's efforts will have little chance of significantly eroding support for the resolutions on Afghanistan at the United Nations and the Nonaligned summit, in our view. The language of these resolutions already falls short of condemning the Soviets by name and calls only for an end to foreign interference in Afghanistan and for peaceful resolution of the dispute. Nevertheless, we believe the regime will look for opportunities to keep the resistance and its external supporters on the defensive. Such surprise moves as seeking the UN General Assembly vice-presidency are likely to be repeated.

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The Soviet-Afghan response to the resistance's increased politicking is, in our view, disproportionate to the alliance's real gains internationally but is an indication that the resistance can—and did—raise the diplomatic costs of the war for the Soviets. Still, the resistance remains hamstrung by internal divisions and lack of Pakistani interest in pushing stronger language for the resolutions on Afghanistan.

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